

Population-Based Public Health Nursing Competencies

Executive Summary Public Health Nursing Competency Task Force Report

**Missouri Department of Health
Council of Public Health Nursing**

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the United States public health system has been experiencing significant change. Public health agencies at the federal, state, and local levels are examining and redefining their roles. There is a new emphasis on building partnerships, containing costs, increasing support for public health, and implementing change. Many agencies are redefining their primary role from providing direct health care services for underserved populations, to providing population-based services for entire communities.

Changes in the public health system have created new demands on the workforce and identified a need for additional education. Many workers do not have the skills and competencies necessary to meet the needs of the emerging public health system. Without a competent workforce, there cannot be a strong and effective system to protect the public. Therefore, it is prudent and necessary to develop the current workforce to meet the needs of the future.

The need to examine and develop the capacity of the public health workforce has been addressed on a national level in reports and documents from various organizations. In Missouri the issue of workforce development has been addressed in relation to developing the public health infrastructure and the need to strengthen the public health nursing system is included in the strategic plan of the Council of Public Health Nursing (CPHN).

Nursing is a critical profession to target when addressing the development of the public health workforce. Nurses implement the majority of public health programs and constitute the largest percentage of the public health workforce. In Missouri, nurses make up 55 percent of the professional staff in local public health agencies compared to 24 percent environmental specialists, 11 percent nutritionist/dietitians and 7 percent health educators.

Public Health Nursing Competency Task Force

In response to national and state recommendations and to accomplish the outcomes identified in their strategic plan, the CPHN established a statewide Public Health Nursing Competency Task Force. The Task Force was given the charge to make recommendations regarding:

- competencies required by registered nurses within the Missouri public health system (state and local) to perform population-based public health nursing; and
- educational standards for registered nurses in population-based public health nursing practice.

In addition to these items, the Task Force also made recommendations regarding the process and resources that should be established to assist current and future nurses to obtain the required education and competencies.

Core Competencies Required to Perform Population-based Public Health Nursing

Public health nursing is the synthesis of nursing and public health theory, art, and science. Public health nurses need foundational knowledge of both nursing and public health. The focus of public health nursing practice is the population as a whole, with nursing care of individuals, families and groups being provided within the context of promoting health and preventing disease and injury in the community. Effective population-based public health nursing practice requires knowledge of:

- nursing practice, theory and research;
- nursing process, nursing diagnosis, and care plan development;
- principles of public health;
- public health nursing interventions;
- professional standards of practice;
- cultural health beliefs and practices;
- principles and methods of teaching and learning;
- policies, structure, and function of local state and federal public health systems;
- health data;
- governmental and private resources;
- local health related ordinances;
- state statutes and rules related to public health and nursing practice;
- financial aspects of program planning;
- quality improvement techniques;
- informatics; and
- marketing and evaluation of public health programs.

In addition to knowledge, specific skills and attributes are necessary to perform population-based public health nursing practice. These skills and attributes are included in the full report of the Task Force.

Education Standard

For many years, national nursing and public health organizations have recommended a baccalaureate degree in nursing as the entry level into the specialty practice of community/public health nursing. This recommendation is based on the fact that public health nurses should have a background in the science and principles of public health which are taught only in nursing education programs at the baccalaureate level. The Task Force agrees that a Baccalaureate Degree in nursing (BSN) should be the minimum standard for nurses in a population-based public health nursing practice. However, the Task Force acknowledges that numerous factors influence the availability of nurses with this level of education and the nurses currently working in public health are a valuable resource that should be cultivated. Therefore, the Task Force recommends the following educational standard.

A nurse performing population-based public health nursing should have a Bachelor of Science Degree (BSN) in Nursing. The nurse with an Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) or a nursing diploma needs additional educational preparation in the concepts and principles of public health nursing practice.

The Task Force recognizes that all nurses employed in local public health agencies do not engage in a practice with a population-based focus. Those nurses whose practice is focused on individuals, such as those working in clinics and home health, do not require the same knowledge and skills as those working in programs with a population-based focus.

Recommendations

Multiple interventions and strategies will be required to develop the capacity of nurses to effectively practice with a population-based focus and respond to the needs of the dynamic health system. To begin to address this work, the Task Force recommends the following:

- Conduct an assessment of registered nurses within the Missouri public health system (state and local) to determine current knowledge related to population-based public health nursing.
- Identify existing educational opportunities and barriers for obtaining needed competencies.
- Define the additional education preparation required to meet the criteria of the public health nursing educational standard and investigate ways to provide access.
- Review and revise the Merit System personnel classification for community health nurses.
- Investigate and share information about differentiated nursing practice in public health.

- Establish an orientation and mentoring program for newly hired registered nurses that facilitates acquisition of the competencies necessary for population-based public health nursing practice.

Conclusion

Ensuring Missouri's nurses are adequately prepared to meet the needs of the dynamic public health system is a complex and multi-faceted endeavor that will require numerous strategies and multiple collaborative partnerships. However, the implementation of the recommendations developed by this Task Force will be a significant step towards accomplishing the desired outcome.

A copy the full report of the Task Force is available from the Center for Local Public Health Services, Missouri Department of Health, telephone (573) 526-0177.